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Understanding Culturally Influenced Approaches to Creativity in an English for Art Purposes Program

"To lead, one must follow." Lao-Tzu's quote embodies the belief that many 1st-semester students at our institution hold regarding their approach to creativity. Whether working on an essay or an art project, many have a tendency to imitate a more skilled person's work as a way of learning, improving, and building confidence. Conversely, it is not uncommon for their instructors to push them to generate original ideas and think outside of the box. These conflicting approaches and other opposing cultural tendencies can lead to a host of challenges for both instructors and our student artists, especially students from Confucian heritage cultures. This article shares observations of these challenges and suggestions for addressing them.

Introduction

Thile no bell rings, there is a strong auditory indicator that classes are getting out in the halls of our English for Art Program, an abrupt linguistic shift. The tones of fluent Chinese replace elementary English as students ease into the comfort and convenience of their native language. While 66% of the students categorized as "international" at our private art university come from China, Taiwan, and Korea, in the Intensive English Courses (the first two levels of ESL in the program), that number normally exceeds 95%, with more than 90% from mainland China. Similar to an EFL setting, our classes commonly consist of what may be perceived as fairly homogeneous groups—students who are all new to our university, all within a narrow age range, all having a similar educational background, and all aspiring to careers in art and design.

However, as Spack cautions in "The Rhetorical Construction of Multilingual Students" (1997), in which she calls attention to the dan-

ger of constructing students' identities via simplistic labels, we seek to appreciate our students' heterogeneity. While well-meaning attempts have been made to establish best practices for teaching English language learners based on their cultural tendencies, the results have often led to the essentialization of student groups based on nationality. One common example is labeling East Asian students as a group who values collectivism and the teacher-centered classroom, where the "transmission of knowledge remains the standard practice as well as an educational aim" (Feng, 2003, p. 9). While no one can deny the influence of the Confucian tradition on Asian education, the complete picture is much more complex, more connected to the global community than ever before, and constantly in flux (Spack, 1997).

The fact that our students seem to be "homogeneous" from an admissions office standpoint, yet are truly diverse, makes them their own myth busters. As we get to know them as individuals, we learn that they attended different types of schools, where the quality of education varied. We learn that some embrace Western culture, while others reject it. We learn that some rebel against their parents, while others cannot make a decision without consulting them. We learn that some are visual learners, who will thrive in the fine arts, while others are remarkable aural learners, pursuing degrees in music and multimedia communications.

And we would be doing them a grand disservice to ignore the individual attributes that this surface "homogeneity" helps bring to light. As Carson argues in "Cultural Backgrounds: What Should We Know About Multilingual Students?," we as teachers "... have an obligation to know them as they know themselves and to use that knowledge to inform our pedagogical practices" (1998, p. 739). It is with this spirit that we approach our research: not to perpetuate cultural myths and stereotypes but instead to attempt to understand how students differ from their "teachers' necessarily restricted understanding of learners' backgrounds" (Carson, 1998, p. 739) in order to better serve them.

To better meet the needs of our changing student body, in 2012 our English for Art Purposes Program created low-beginner ESL courses (A1 on the Common European Framework of Reference, 2011) for newly admitted students whose proficiency was particularly low. These language courses included sheltered art workshops to keep our student artists connected to their goals and to introduce them to our classroom culture. In a graduate photography workshop, the first homework assignment resulted in a striking display of cultures' colliding.

For the assignment, the students were asked to use a self-portrait and layer it with another photograph in Adobe Photoshop to create a composite image. They were also shown a wide range of sample work. Although the majority of the class created original self-portraits as instructed, three students (see images in bottom row of Figure 1) directly copied the style of another student (image at top), who was more experienced in photography. When asked about their reasons for copying, one student explained that the best way to learn a new skill was to copy a "master" in order to learn his or her technique.

Intrigued to learn more about perceptions of this approach, we decided to interview our students and faculty members to compare their views on creativity, learning from examples, differences between Eastern and Western creativity, and creativity's role in language learning. We hoped to gain insight into this choice to closely emulate or copy others' work, as well as their philosophies for tackling the creative process and how it might relate to learning art and English.









Figure 1. Three students (bottom row) copied the style of a more experienced student (above) in their self-portraits.

Literature Review and Hypothesis

In researching this topic, we found several definitions of creativity. In his book *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, Sawyer (2006) defines it as "the emergence of something novel and appropriate, from a person, a group, or a society" (p. 33). He also

explains how our concept of creativity has changed through the years and how only several centuries ago, imitating the works of established masters was the norm. He describes creativity as being cultural and specifically mentions the differences between individualist cultures, which prize innovation and breaking conventions, and collectivist cultures, in which it is important for the work to *not* be different or stand out (Sawyer, 2006, p. 148).

In *Creativity: When East Meets West*, authors Lau, Hui, and Ng (2004) define creativity as "the capacity to produce novel, original work that fits within task constraints" (p. 25). They go on to say that the Asian concept of creativity could be described as "the successive reconfiguration of an initial totality, the reinterpretation of traditional ideas — finding a new point of view — more than a dramatic break with tradition" (Lau, Hui, & Ng, 2004, p. 36). These authors also describe the different approaches to creativity between Western and Eastern cultures, and specifically the Chinese educational emphasis, by which students must master a skill with hard work and repetition over a long period of time before they can begin to express their creativity (Lau, Hui, & Ng, 2004, p. 143).

An article in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* by Howard Gardner described the Chinese approach in this way:

The older and more powerful person knows how to carry out the desired behavior, and it is his or her role to show the younger person how to do it—both transmitting the superior knowledge of the past and establishing the authority of his generation in the process. Why cast about for new approaches ... when the best ways have long since been discovered and fashioned to perfection? (1989, p. 150)

The opinion that Maley (2015) expresses in the overview chapter of *Creativity in the English Language Classroom* dovetails with the previous definitions. He contends that creativity is "born of discipline and thrives in a context of constraints" (p. 6), arguing that constraints serve as both "stimulus and support" (p. 6) for the creators. While Maley does not refer specifically to Eastern versus Western cultural approaches to the creative process, he does remark that "creativity is universal, though its manifestations may be specific and local" (Maley, 2015, p. 6).

In addition to researching definitions of, or approaches to, creativity, we considered other cultural factors that might pose a challenge for our student artists, specifically the concept of authorship. An article titled "The China Conundrum" in *The Chronicle of Higher*

Education describes the growing challenges faced by many universities as they welcome record numbers of Chinese students. Plagiarism is often the greatest area of contention, and helping Chinese students to grasp the Western understanding of authorship is not easy. "American concepts of intellectual property don't translate readily to students from a country where individualism is anathema" (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011, Authorship and Authority section, para. 3).

However, in "Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism," Pennycook (1996) points out that the Western idea of authorship is far from absolute. Tracing the tension between originality and reverent imitation from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment era, he highlights the notion that the two are twin forces in the arts: Each artistic era borrows from a previous one to make something new (p. 206). He expands his argument to ask questions about plagiarism within the context of language itself and concludes that "meanings are in a sense in circulation ... language is constantly cycled and recycled" (p. 207).

However, it would be too simplistic to view Pennycook's argument as permissive of plagiarism in any cultural context. To more deeply understand plagiarism and how it affects his Chinese students, he asks them about their own experiences and ideas. Several of his students expressed that antiplagiarism attitudes directly contradict the way they learned English growing up, which was through memorization and regurgitation, both methods that they view as perfectly valid. In fact, they believed that "strict attitudes to borrowing from other texts failed to take into account what students learned" (p. 225). Moreover, Pennycook made this profound discovery about his interviewees: "Many seem to feel that they have no ownership over English—it remains an alien language—and thus to write 'in their own words' is not something that can be done in English" (p. 225).

After considering multiple definitions of creativity and views of authorship, we hypothesized that differences in cultural tendencies may be the most important factor to consider in classrooms where students are expected to express their creativity, whether it be through their artwork or their English assignments. As discussed in Ryuko Kubota's 2001 TESOL Quarterly article, "Discursive Construction of the Images of U.S. Classrooms," the goal should not be to idealize the American classroom, but to acknowledge the cultural differences between educational systems as a way to understand and value them both in an effort to provide the best learning environment for the students (Kubota, 2001). Our research team suggests that the student approach to the photography assignment described in the introductory scenario is often misunderstood and labeled as plagiarism in a culture

where originality and individuality appear to be prized so highly. This causes confusion and frustration for students and teachers alike, especially for new students who have not yet understood or adapted to American classroom expectations.

Method: Participants, Procedures, and Limitations

To investigate student and faculty views on creativity, our research team interviewed four groups of participants. Each group had eight members, resulting in 32 individual interviews. Group 1 comprised first-semester students, both graduate and undergraduate. Group 2 consisted of graduate and undergraduate students who had been at the university for two to three years. All of the students were from China, Taiwan, or Korea. Group 3 was made up of art and design faculty from various departments, and Group 4 was composed of ESL instructors from the institution's English for Art Purposes Program.

All participants were asked the same set of eight questions:

- 1. What is creativity?
- 2. Is creativity important? Why or why not?
- 3. How can you teach/learn creativity?
- 4. What is the most important part of creativity—the steps of a process or the final product? Why?
- 5. Do you use examples of other people's work to teach/learn English or art? Why or why not?
- 6. How do you feel about creativity?
- 7. Do you think there is a difference between US and Asian creativity? (What is the difference?)
- 8. Can creativity help people learn new languages? Why or why not?

To facilitate our first-semester students' comprehension, they were interviewed in their native language. Many interviewees still seemed confused by Question 6 and gave very limited responses, so we disregarded this part of our results.

Findings and Discussion

We found that most of our respondents agreed upon the definition and importance of creativity, but they differed about whether it could be learned and the importance of the creative process. Students and instructors also shared the same point of view about the value of using examples both in art and English classes. They also generally agreed that there is a difference between American and Asian ap-

proaches to creativity. Respondents did not see eye to eye about the connection between language learning and creativity; however, there did seem to be evidence that it is challenging for students to transition from mimicking to more original self-expression in both art and language learning. In the following sections, we explain and discuss these findings in detail.

Perspectives of Creativity and the Creative Process

Across the board, the majority of interviewees defined creativity the same way: making something new or having a new idea. The instructors in Groups 3 and 4 also added that creativity refers to the process or ability to build on preexisting ideas. The art and design teachers defined creativity as a mode of expression that can take various forms, while a couple of the ESL teachers described it as a mechanism for internalizing impressions.

All groups emphatically agreed that creativity is vitally important to them and to the world. Both students and instructors acknowledged its link to human progress and power to save us from stagnation. A first-semester graphic design student responded, "Creativity is the fountainhead of design; without it, there is no design." More experienced students linked creativity's importance to its infinite possibilities, noting that you cannot always copy another person. The art and design teachers concurred, describing creativity as the force that drives evolution and "connects all of us despite our diverse cultural differences." ESL instructors responded that creativity is what makes us human, adding that teaching and learning without creativity is not possible.

Most first-semester students held differing opinions about whether or not creativity can be learned, but students further along and instructors thought that it can be learned or at least cultivated. Newly arrived students offered the most varied responses: Some thought it could be learned, that creativity develops from a combination of ideas and continual practice, while others contended that creativity is largely an innate talent. Students who had been studying in the US for two to three years thought that creativity can be learned or cultivated, and they gave various suggestions to develop one's creativity: taking a walk, making a brainstorm map, watching a movie, reading a book, using the Internet, talking to others, paying attention, and having experiences. For the art and design instructors, creativity is not only something one can learn, but it is deeply connected to process—the idea of introducing a sequence of steps and then guiding their students through them. Three of the responses referred to showing students examples to both inspire them and to display a range of possibilities. Three of the art and design instructors also discussed the importance of encouraging their students to think individually, to experiment with new ideas, and to express themselves fully. The ESL instructors elaborated that in addition to introducing process, they seek to give students permission to be creative by providing opportunities and creating an atmosphere that is conducive to self-expression.

We then asked interviewees to prioritize either the creative process or the product of one's efforts. Again, first-semester students and freshmen held differing opinions. Meanwhile, more advanced students rejected the nature of the question, while instructors valued the process the most. Our freshman and first-semester graduate students had much to say. One student voted for process over product, explaining that "by going through the process we are able to reflect and gain the ability to practice, making our thoughts more expansive." But other students rejected the either/or nature of the question, arguing that the two were equally important. Others said that having an initial idea is most important because it is the underlying purpose of undergoing the creative process and new ideas can continuously emerge throughout. Students who were further along in their course of study argued that both process and product are very important. Many of the students talked about the relationship between having a good process and a good final product, and about the importance of feedback in the learning/creating process. Seven of the eight art and design faculty clearly agreed that the process is the most important part of creativity. The exception replied that all parts are important but that creativity is exercised most at the beginning stages. Although they mentioned that both process and product are integral to creativity, all ESL instructors emphasized the process as being more closely associated with the act of being creative.

While creativity is a global phenomenon and creative behavior a common human cognitive capacity, research suggests that it is not necessarily viewed in the same way by all cultures. The *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* article "Emotions and Creativity, East and West" (Averill, Chon, & Hahn, 2001) explores differences in judgments of creativity among cultures. They generalize that Western cultures value novelty, while Eastern cultures emphasize authenticity, citing Western individualism and Eastern collectivism as the likely underlying causes for these aesthetic preferences. Likewise, our research team conjectured that Asian art students and instructors at a US institution would have different views of creativity. However, our interviewees' interpretations of creativity were more similar than we had imagined, the only difference being the instructors' extension of the definition to include personal expression, which could be interpreted as the American

cultural tendency to emphasize individualism. And while both parties expressed deep enthusiasm for the importance of creativity, their opinions regarding learning creativity and process versus product are less aligned, setting the scene for potential misunderstandings in both their art and ESL classes.

The Importance of Examples for Teaching and Learning

As instructors, we were particularly interested in whether or not students believed in using examples, viewing someone else's art as a model, and whether that same principle could be applied to language learning. Generally, the students and instructors interviewed thought that using examples is a useful instructional method, both in art and English classes. The reasons are twofold: Examples clarify instructions and also give students inspiration.

Students who had a positive attitude toward examples in art classes said that they are helpful because they make assignments clear. As nonnative speakers of English, they can better grasp an instructor's expectations with the help of examples. They also said that they like to use examples as a reference to come up with their own ideas.

In regard to learning English, the majority thought that using examples to learn was not only helpful but also necessary. One graduate student, in her final year of study, shared her opinion:

Learning English, of course, I think learning English for me is mimic other people's pronunciation and reading and writing and learning from other peoples—really, you know, helps me ... to make more sense in English. Even though, sometimes, you know, from grammar I don't understand, but everybody saying like this way, so that's what I'm learn.

All of the art and design instructors surveyed supported the use of examples. Four of them elaborated that showing examples of other artists' work, especially former students' work, makes current students aware of the competition and drives them to work harder. Three of the respondents explained how using examples is vital to teaching their population of students, who are both international and visual; it helps them develop "an eye for design."

All ESL instructors reported presenting examples of work as a guide to understanding how others have approached an assignment. They use it as a way to evaluate and clarify expectations. Some mentioned that examples increase students' self-confidence and even "spark" the process.

However, some students and instructors noted the limitations of

using examples. For that reason, some instructors do not freely show other people's work. Some choose to withhold examples until students have completed a first draft, while others show many examples at the beginning of the semester and none at the end. Two students, who had been studying in the US for a couple of years, reported that they did not want examples in their art classes. They thought it limited their creativity because after seeing an example, they felt more inclined to make work like the example. However, they contended that using examples in English class was considerably more helpful. One of them compared using examples in art courses versus in an English class:

If you have example, you just know "Oh, maybe teacher want this style," so I just do this style, follow this one, so this is not your own work. It's like a copy, copy style. So, like but in English, I like example in the homework, because English is second language, so it's more difficult and ... so give you some example you know, "Oh, this word can use like that." So it's different—in English I like example, but art I don't.

The students' responses also reflect the generally accepted wisdom that examples are undeniably a valuable resource because they demonstrate sentence patterns and clarify assignment expectations. Their limitations have also been thoroughly explored, one being that they can be soporific and rote and force students to rein in their own creativity (Watson-Reekie, 1994). Yet, as Pennycook points out, copying examples and absorbing them through memorization has been part of China's approach to education for centuries. He continues to argue that to dismiss memorization as a passive, flawed way of learning is to misunderstand its essence, which is that it can lead to a deeper understanding and mastery of the material (Pennycook, 1996). Gardner also observes that "skill before creativity" (1989, p. 154) is the bedrock of China's educational system. It is no wonder, then, that the students interviewed here seem to equate copying others' language use as a legitimate way to learn, which can lead to serious consequences in the US classroom. While the instructors rely on sharing example work with students to make assignment expectations clear, the students' mixed answers reveal that they do not consider tapping into their creativity when completing English assignments as they would when approaching an art project.

The Difference Between US and Asian Creativity

We found that our student artists and faculty members perceived a difference between American and Asian approaches to creativity, citing societal and educational influences as the underlying causes. Some students believe that lifestyle and the degree of openness of a society influence creativity. One Fine Art graduate student described the hierarchy of Chinese society as a "totality," in which citizens are not encouraged to be too creative because they are more concerned about maintaining "the system." She gave another example of this, referencing the muted fluctuations of Chinese art history (compared to the more radical breaks with tradition found throughout Western art history) as the result of the unspoken requirement for artists to obey the rules and express themselves in a subtle way. She emphasized that relationships between people are always the most important factor to consider in her culture, so anything that might upset the balance, such as being different or standing out too much, is discouraged.

Additional opinions gathered during our interviews reinforced the importance of hierarchy in our students' educational backgrounds. Many reported that the Chinese school system does not value creativity and therefore does not foster it in students. In addition, faculty observed that Asian-educated students had better craftsmanship, while others reported that Western students were more willing to take risks with their work. Some instructors also mentioned that their Asian students are used to receiving explicit instruction about the process, which makes them more concerned about the product.

In Gardner's article, he describes five "relative differences" between American and Chinese culture. One assumption is that Chinese society is hierarchically organized and this sense of organization is present in the structure of the school. The educational approach is that "individuals need to be carefully molded from the first to conform to societal values and practices" (1989, p. 149). He describes a dual orientation: upward toward authority and backward toward tradition. In this educational structure, authority is the teacher and the Chinese past is knowledge. Students' behavior is directed toward the teacher, whose job is to transmit knowledge as efficiently as possible (Gardner, 1989). Therefore, it may be disorienting for students who come from countries with Confucian-influenced educational systems when their American teachers act as facilitators, rather than primary information givers, who encourage students to construct knowledge on their own.

Connections Between Language Learning and Creativity

We were surprised to discover that participants varied greatly in how they viewed the connection between creativity and language learning. This was a concern, given that our ESL faculty often strive to teach creativity and to draw parallels between artistic process and language acquisition and use. These attitudes may even manifest themselves in students' viewing their English courses as an obstacle to earning an art degree rather than as a tool for obtaining one.

When we posed the question, "Can creativity help people learn new languages?," our newly arrived students offered an assortment of answers. Some could not see a connection, viewing language as a system of rules and language learning as mainly a test of following conventions and paying attention to details. Others said that creative thinking lends itself to learning in all kinds of situations and that studying under a creative teacher would offer students new ways to learn. Our seasoned students seemed to view this question in terms of motivation and gave answers describing why it was important for them to learn English in order to be successful in their classes. A couple of students talked about how using creative approaches to language learning helped them excel and break the monotony of just studying from a textbook. Two more students said "No," viewing creativity as totally separate from their language learning.

We received the greatest variety of answers from our art and design instructors. Six of the eight participants replied "Yes," meaning that creativity can help people learn new languages, but they had different reasons to support their answers, from "Art is a universal language that stems from creativity" to how successful teachers employ creativity to facilitate learning. One common theme referred to students' using creativity to find the best ways for them to learn. All ESL instructors expressed their belief that learning a new language involves a creative process similar to creating art, which requires curiosity and recombining preexisting and new ideas. They also remarked that the ability to express oneself and connect with people is a very creative act.

We also noticed a parallel between the successful use of a mimicking approach to both language learning and art production by students at beginning levels in the early stages of mastering a subject, as previously described. We further observed that these students seemed to have a difficult time moving beyond this stage to achieve original self-expression, based on the responses of their instructors. We found this to be true in both their art and language classes.

The majority of our ESL faculty were trained to adopt the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which often calls on students to generate spontaneous responses and to construct their own ideas. In the article "The Relationship Between Individual Differences in Learner Creativity and Language Learning Success," Ottó concludes that CLT "tasks that require students to participate creatively may restrict the language learning opportunities of less creative students" (Ottó, 1998, p. 772). In an effort to not leave any learner

behind, a curriculum that includes opportunities for students to learn from "good plagiarism," in the form of copying and mimicking activities that promote learning, may be beneficial. As Pennycook concludes, "All language learning is to some extent a process of borrowing others' words" (1996, p. 227).

Conclusion

Pedagogical Implications

One motivation our team had for beginning this research project was to understand why our students struggle to express themselves creatively in ways that meet their American university instructors' expectations in their artwork, their English writing, and their approach to learning. We provided one example (the photography assignment) in the introduction of this article, but we have seen this type of scenario play out in both art and English classrooms on many occasions at our institution. After completing our interviews, we were left with more questions (see "Further Questions" section) and hope to pursue this topic further. In the meantime, we offer the following suggestions for instructors who wish to make the American creative approach more accessible to students from all backgrounds.

While our students and faculty had similar definitions of creativity, some first-semester students were not convinced that it was something that could be taught. Therefore, it is essential for new students to expand their mind-sets about learning creativity when it comes to their artistic process and language acquisition. Often this develops through time, as students meet fellow artists and receive a toolbox of approaches from their instructors. However, instructors and program coordinators can be proactive during the initial stages of their studies by sharing student success stories and welcoming thriving alumni back into our classrooms as guest speakers. We were fortunate enough to hire two of our own former students from China and Japan to lead our first-semester students' sheltered art workshops. Having graduated and established themselves as professional artists and instructors, they also displayed an inspirational "ownership" of the English language. They were shining examples of success who quickly brought our new students up to speed on how to meet US classroom expectations and stressed the importance of learning English in order to achieve their goals.

Since it can be difficult for students from other cultures to understand the subtle line between copying and acceptable appropriation in art, or plagiarism and paraphrasing in writing, we suggest making expectations very clear through the use of examples. Students benefit from very explicit guidelines about how similar or different work

can be and are grateful to see a product within the context of its constraints. This may entail showing them a range of examples of work that is "unacceptably" similar or sufficiently different. Instructors should give them time to carefully examine assignments with varying degrees of plagiarism and guide them in evaluating which ones would be accepted by an American teacher and which ones may lead to serious academic consequences. Such activities can be eye opening and save future confusion, especially for first-semester students.

Most of our students cited societal and educational influences as the underlying causes of the differences between an American and Asian approach to creativity. Coming from a tradition of teacher-centered curricula, our Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean aspiring artists may perceive experimentation and a lack of instructor intervention as poor teaching. Thus it is important to strike a balance between giving students the freedom to explore their creative potential and giving them the feedback that they need to progress. Just as important may be providing aclear rationale to those who are beginning their program of study in the US as to why an American instructor might refrain from giving feedback at certain times.

Since our student artists are generally more motivated by their art and design courses than by fulfilling their English requirement, our research team was invested in finding out whether students and faculty saw a connection between language acquisition and creativity. Given the results, it is clear to us that the connection we see needs to be made more evident to the students and that we should be constantly modeling creative ways to approach learning. Maley also suggests that teachers need to practice what they preach and "develop a creative attitude of mind which permeates everything they do—not to regard creativity as something reserved for special occasions" (Maley, 2015, p. 7).

Many of our student artists come to the US facing great pressure to succeed. Those coming from a culture in which they are accustomed to copying a master teacher may need time to build their confidence in expressing themselves and creating original work. When faculty take the time to examine students' cultural tendencies in the classroom and their underlying causes, we become better qualified to serve our students and support them in adopting new approaches to their work that will help them adapt and even thrive.

Further Ouestions

As we dove below the surface of our student artists' perceptions of creativity during the course of our research, we were often struck with the desire to go into more depth and to ask them more specific questions, such as:

- To what degree must something be different to be considered "new," "original," or "creative"?
- How did you approach the creative process in your home country, and do you approach it differently here in America?
- Do you feel that the creative process of making artwork is similar to the creative process of writing an essay in English class?
- Has your approach to creativity changed since you came to the US?

For the time being, we are grateful to have additional insights into their views on creativity and the cultural constructs, traditions, and tendencies from which they derive. We hope that these discoveries will help us to better prepare them for their future art and design courses.

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